

The influence of chronic illness upon the writings of Alexander Pope

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Alexander Pope had serious and major physical deformities and disabilities which set him apart from healthy people. It is only recently however, that serious attention has been paid to the influence of Pope's major physical infirmities upon his writings and upon the friendly or hostile writings of others who made pointed and often unfriendly comments upon his physical appearance. A useful work to fill the void of adequate assessment of Pope's severe and chronic illnesses on his work is the study of Marjorie Nicolson and G S Rousseau in their book *This Long Disease, My Life*¹. It is surprising that there has been so little interest on the influence of Pope's many illnesses upon his work as well as the work of his contemporaries and successors. Nicolson and Rousseau note: 'Realizing his sensitivity, we should not expect to find an extended account, in his own words, of his deformity and puny stature, as we find a full history of other illnesses'¹. There is ample evidence of his awareness of the impact of his obvious short stature and deformity on other people and there are references to it in his own writings. Some of these self portraits will be examined.

In order to assess the role of illness on Pope's work it is necessary to have some understanding of his diseases. Appreciation of the severity and the nature of his disabilities helps provide understanding of the effects that they may have had upon his work. The title of the Nicolson and Rousseau book is taken from Pope's line in his 'An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot'² and is a reflection of his severe suffering from illness throughout his entire life. It was rare that he had many days of consecutive health during his long period of creative writing. However, his spirit was indomitable and his industry in work was incredibly large. In fact, he thought that his poetic gift, his Muse, actually helped him through his '... long Disease, my Life'².

His illnesses seem to have begun with rickets which could have been due to a dietary insufficiency of calcium, or a failure of absorption of the substance now known as vitamin D. This illness, probably dietary in origin and not genetic, produced a compound curvature of the spine known as kyphoscoliosis as described by Sir Arthur Salusbury MacNalty³. A major component of his spinal illness however, was Pott's disease, which is tuberculosis of the bone of the spine, an illness caused by a blood-borne infection due to the ingestion of milk contaminated by the tubercle bacillus⁴. Of course, Pott did not know of the Koch bacillus of tuberculosis but he recognized the spinal complications of the disease.

Pope also suffered severely from migraine which resulted in frequent and severe headaches. The self

prescribed treatment he took for his migraine has some modern scientific basis in that caffeine combined with other drugs is useful for the relief of symptoms of this disease. He drank many cups of coffee (which contains caffeine) both day and night, and also inhaled the steam of the hot coffee. The ingestion of large amounts of coffee contributed to the insomnia from which he also suffered most of his life. His long periods of wakefulness undoubtedly gave him more writing time and the cerebral stimulation due to caffeine in the coffee could have had a useful effect as well on his productivity⁴. Pope also suffered from an eye ailment, undoubtedly severe myopia, a disability which surely contributed to his difficulties in reading and writing. His strong determination overcame these handicaps and he wrote and read voluminously and productively.

Finally, another major and debilitating illness that he had was asthma. In view of the severe compression of his lungs by the complications and consequences of kyphoscoliosis and Pott's disease, the asthma may have been due to lung compression and functional impairment of both respiration and circulation with subsequent congestive heart failure. Difficulty in breathing in individuals with compressed lungs inside of deformed chests is not unusual. The development of signs of heart failure from which Pope suffered was a major contribution to the unfortunate events which probably caused his death. The end result of his major thoracic cage impairments was total cardiac failure masquerading as asthma¹.

These important and severe illnesses are reflected in part, at least, in his acquisition of medical friends as well as a strong interest in things medical. To be sure the medical friends were often literary companions as well. It could be that these friendships helped him attain some emotional security about his health. Whether these medical support systems were factors or not, his poetic writings are remarkably devoid of self-pity and bitterness about his lot in life. He was grateful for the help which he received medically, even though, in the light of modern knowledge, it was grossly insufficient and probably harmful. His literary collaborator and friend, Dr Arbuthnot, who was a physician, helped him medically and worked with him in the literary world. Pope's gratitude to Dr Arbuthnot is reflected in the 'Epistle' to Dr Arbuthnot: 'Friend to my Life, (which did you not prolong, / The World had wanted many an Idle Song)'². And further: 'To second, ARBUTHNOT! Thy Art and Care / And teach, the Being you preserv'd to hear'². His appreciation of the care of other physicians and surgeons including Mead and Cheselden is described in his *Imitations of Horace, Epistle I to Lord Bolingbroke*:

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'Weak tho' I am of limb, and short of sight,
Far from a Lynx, and not a Giant quite,
I'll do what MEAD and CHESELDEN advise,
To keep these limbs, and to preserve these eyes.'²

His gratitude to physicians for even the inadequate advice available at the time which he received about his vision, his stature, and his illnesses is extraordinary and reflects the kindness of Pope's spirit considering the hopelessness of correcting these disabilities. In some of Pope's prose writings, he described with great, good humour his infirmities and in fact, used them to produce self-mocking brilliant wit. These self-portraits in his work are astonishing considering the severity of his deformity. It was the subject of some of his most humorous writing. Best known of these works are the two articles entitled "The Club of Little Men." I and II. To the fictitious Nestor Ironside, Esq.³ These two articles are splendidly humorous and one searches in vain for any evidence of self-pity or bitterness about his severe physical disabilities. In fact, Pope uses his dwarf-like stature to produce hilarious and simultaneously tragic humour. As the person who signs himself Bob Short, he writes about short stature in a most amusing manner. There is also serious reflection of compensatory wisdom of his feeling about himself and his stature in the first of these articles where he states: 'Indeed, the Observation that no Man is Ridiculous for being what he is, but only in the Affectation of being something more, is equally true in regard to the Mind and the Body'⁴. It is apparent in these few words that dignity and self-esteem are most important and are more related to conforming to the reality of what one is rather than the pretence of trying to be something or somebody else. Pope felt no loss of status nor self-esteem for being very short. He had a brilliant mind; he knew it, and it did not require a tall stature to be the gifted poet that he was.

The praise of the virtues of small stature has many humorous and delightful aspects. Pope writes, for example, 'the Day of our Institution was the Tenth of December, being the Shortest of the Year, on which we are to hold an Annual Feast over a Dish of Shrimps'⁵. The delight of minute detail that he presents captures the idea of the virtues of smallness in the common experiences of people. In order to continue the miniature concept, the Clubroom was prepared in a very special way. Pope describes it: 'In the first Place we caus'd a total Removal of all the Chairs, Stools, and Tables, which had served the gross of Mankind for many Years'⁶. He then portrays the ludicrous consequences of tiny people in normal sized chairs with normal sized tables. For individual members who attempt to be tall and join the other world, 'The Club of Little Men' has a procedure of expulsion. The form used in expelling a member is 'Go from among us, and be tall if you can!'⁷ The first essay concludes with the idea that perfection tends to miniaturization and that 'all Human Kind shall at last grow down to Perfection, that is to say, be reduced to our own Measure'⁸.

On the following day after the first paper in 'The Club of Little Men' in *The Guardian* 91, Pope continues writing to the fictitious Nestor Ironside about 'The Club of Little Men'. Among those members whom Pope describes as 'The most eminent Persons of our Assembly are a little Poet'⁹. The word eminent can have a double meaning, a quality common in

Pope's other writings. There is a sense of ironic humour in describing a small individual as eminent, a word that suggests largeness, but it also reflects Pope's accurate and honest assessment of himself as being an outstanding poet. Pope describes himself as Dick Distick who is the President of The Club of Little Men in a most humorous and yet simultaneously sad description in these words:

'The first of these, Dick Distick by Name, we have elected President, not only as he is the shortest of us all, but because he has entertain'd so just a Sense of the Stature, as to go generally in Black that he may appear yet Less. Nay, to that Perfection is he arrived, that he *stoops* as he walks. The Figure of the Man, is odd enough; he is a lively little Creature, with long Arms and Legs: A Spider is no ill Emblem of him. He has been taken at a Distance for a *small Windmill*. But indeed what principally moved us in his Favour was his Talent in Poetry, for he hath promised to undertake a long Work in *short Verse* to celebrate the Heroes of our Size'¹⁰.

The sadness is apparent but it is accompanied by high good humour, and also a significant sense of self-esteem. Pope described himself more objectively in his Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot:

'I cough like Horace, and tho' lean, am short,
Ammon's great Son and shoulder had too high,
Such Ovid's nose, and "Sir! You have an Eye—"
Go on, obliging Creatures, make me see
All that disgrac'd my Betters, *met in me*'¹¹

There is therefore a keen sense of accuracy in Pope's written perception of his appearance, but there is little evidence of complaint, of self-pity, or bitterness with his lot in life.

Although Pope had periods of relative physical comfort, they were, unfortunately, not frequent. His poetical self-descriptions of his deformity and his illnesses do not give a total picture of his self-evaluation of his state of health. He wrote to John Caryll:

'My ill state of health ever since the cold weather began renders vain any such pleasing thoughts as of the enjoyment of your fireside: I cannot express how thoroughly I'm penetrated by the sharpness of it. I feel no thing alive but my heart and head; my spirits, like those in a thermometer mount and fall thro' my thin delicate contexture just as the temper of air is more benign or inclement'¹².

To Caryll, Pope, also wrote:

'I have lain under an impediment to all amusement and pleasure these many months, namely very great indispositions and such an alteration in my constitution as rather deserves to be called a ruin than a revolution'¹³.

To add to his description of his own indisposition, Pope said in a letter to Fortescue:

'I am in the condition of an old fellow of Threescore, with a Complication of Diseases upon me; A constant Headache; ruind Tone of the Stomach; the Piles; a Vomiting & Looseness; & an Excess of Wind. Some of these succeed, the moment I get quit of the others; & upon the whole, indeed I am in a very uncomfortable way'¹⁴.

His published writings which are an accurate portrayal of his various deformities and illnesses

are engaging in their humour and less specific about his actual state of health unlike his letters. Probably these qualities of non-obsessive description of his disabilities contributed to a relative lack of attention to the influences on his writings of his illnesses on the part of his biographers. Dr Samuel Johnson's biography of Pope, for instance, gives very little indication of Pope's illnesses and disability except for an indirect reference to his health problems. He also does not address the impact of Pope's illnesses upon his writings. Johnson states:

'Pope was from his birth of a constitution tender and delicate; but is said to have shewn remarkable gentleness and sweetness of disposition. The weakness of his body continued through his life, but the mildness of his mind perhaps ended with his childhood'⁸.

The only suggestion of the effect of illness on Pope's writings in Dr Johnson's statement is a note of warning that his later life did not show so mild a disposition. It may be inferred that Johnson thought that chronic illness may have contributed to the acerbity of his writings. An important consideration about Pope's attitude toward his health may be due to his concepts of plenitude which were expressed in the *An Essay on Man*. In this philosophical work, Pope believing in the doctrine of plenitude, probably could accept his own severe deformity and his illnesses as part of the mysterious will of God. It is possible that 'Whatever is, is Right' also pertains to his self-evaluation. He would not question the physical problems which were his life. Severe illnesses had to be borne stoically. If God wills it, it must be accepted. Despite the obvious intense personal and long suffering which Pope experienced, there have been very few poets in the English language of greater productivity, greater excellence, and of greater artistic brilliance. God may have ordained his suffering and his illnesses, but he was free to use his great talent nonetheless.

Despite Pope's apparent acceptance of his multiple sicknesses and great physical deformity as God's will, it did not prevent an heightened sensitivity to criticism which may have been unconscious in origin in many of his relationships. Pope, was a sharp satirist and a critic in the larger sense of that word about the human condition. He was provocative and nasty about some of the personal things that he wrote about other people, better endowed physically but not so brilliant intellectually. In the *Imitations of Horace*, Satire two number 1, he wrote some lines which were extraordinarily provocative to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and her husband which caused a response that was also particularly vicious. 'Avidien (Edward Wortley Montagu) or his Wife (no matter which),/For him you'll call a dog, and her a bitch'². And: 'Yet soft by Nature, more a Dupe than Wit/Sapho can tell you how this Man was bit:' Pope added in the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace (Satires II, 213-18) a most unpleasant verse attacking Lady Mary: 'From furious Sappho scarce a milder Fate,/P_x'd by her Love, or libell'd by her Hate.'² Lady Mary responded:

'Thine is just such an image of his pen,
As thou thyself art of the sons of men,
Where our own species in burlesque we trace,
A sign post likeness of the human race,
That is at once resemblance and disgrace, . . .

The object of thy spleen is humankind:
It preys on all who yield, or who resist:
To thee 'tis provocation to exist. . . .
Not even youth and beauty can control,
The universal rancour of thy soul; . . .
That wretched little carcase you retain,
The reason is, not that the world wants eyes,
But thou'rt so mean, they see, and they despise: . . .
Ne'er be thy guilt forgiven, or forgot;⁹
But, as thou hat'st, be hated by mankind,
And with the emblem of thy crooked mind,
Markd on thy back, like Cain, by God's own hand,
Wander like him, accursed through the land'¹⁰.

Other victims of Pope's sharp wit did not hesitate to emphasize with cruelty the deficiencies in his physique. In the *Martiniad*:

'At Twickenham, chronicles remarked,
There dwelt a little parish clerk,
A peevish wight, full fond of fame,
And Martin Scribbler was his name.
Meager and wan and steeple-crown'd,
His visage long and shoulders round;
His crippled corpse two spindle-pegs.
His shrivelled skin's of dusky grain,
A cricket's voice and monkey's brain'³.

Pope's deformities and severe illnesses did not adversely affect his productivity but had a marked influence on the content and the nature of his writings. He attacked others sharply and his wit and his great sense of satire provoked responsive attacks upon his deformities by the victims of his writings. His own works were devoid of self-pity and full of brilliant humour. His physical and emotional problems did nothing to diminish his literary lustre. His genius and his vast productivity were aided by his indomitable will, his lack of sense of self-pity, and his philosophical acceptance of his deformities and disabilities as part of God's will.

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